DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 053 411 CG 006 556

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TITLE Censorship as an Attitude Change Induction.
INSTITUTION Rutgers, The State Univ., New Brunswick, N.J.
PUB DATE Apr 71
NOTE 7p.; Speech given before Eastern Psychological Association Annual Meeting (42nd, New York, N.Y., April 15-17, 1971)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes, Beliefs, *Changing Attitudes, Civil Rights, *Freedom of Speech, *Motivation, Motivation Techniques, *Opinions

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a preliminary investigation of the relationship between censorship and attitude change. The author initially discusses reactance theory which holds that when a person's freedom to perform a particular behavior is threatened or eliminated, he experiences a motivational state directed toward safeguarding or restoring his freedom. Specifically, it is hypothesized that censorship of a speech which advocates a particular position arouses reactance in a person who could have heard the talk, producing a tendency for him to change his attitude on the issue toward greater agreement with the censored position. Thirty-six subjects were assigned to one of 3 conditions: (1) no censor; (2) censor own position; and (3) censor opposing position. Results offer support for the hypothesis. Subjects who agreed with the position advocated by the censored speech became more favorably disposed to that position. Those who disagreed changed their attitude in the direction of greater agreement with the position. (TL)

ED053411

Eastern Psychological
Association Convention
April, 1971
New York, New York

Censorship as an Attitude Change Induction

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CG 006 556

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The recent furor surrounding the release of the report of the National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (e.g., Weaver, 1970) highlights the importance of the topic of censorship and the lack of understanding of the effects of censorship. This paper presents the results of a preliminary investigation of the relationship between censorship and attitude change.

Censorship is usually applied under the assumption that if one is not exposed to a particular speech or book, etc., then one will not be converted to belief in whatever the speech or book was advocating. This may, indeed, be a safe assumption when one is not aware that he is being deprived of the opportunity to hear the speech or read the book. However, reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) suggests that when one is aware that "X" is being censored, the censorship may have the paradoxical effect of increasing agreement with X.

According to reactance theory, when a person's freedom to perform a particular behavior is threatened or eliminated, he experiences a motivational state which is directed toward safeguarding or restoring the freedom in question. Censorship of a speech advocating position X on an attitude continuum is, of course, a threat to one's freedom to adopt or believe in position X. It should follow, then, that such censorship would arouse reactance and that the individual's subsequent behavior would be directed toward asserting his freedom to adopt the censored position. If he had initially disagreed with position X, the clearest way he can assert his freedom to adopt that position is by moving closer to the position. If he had initially agreed with position X, the clearest way he can assert his freedom to adopt that position is by reinforcing his initial position, i.e., by becoming more extreme.

Thus, the present experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that censorship of a speech which advocates a particular position arouses re-

actance in a person who could have heard the talk, producing a tendency for him to change his attitude on the issue toward greater agreement with the censored position.

The design was a 2 x 3 factorial. Half of the subjects were initially in moderate agreement with the attitude issue, while the other half were initially in moderate disagreement. Within each of these groups, one third had their own position on the attitude issue censored, one third had the opposing position censored, and one third simply took the post-test without being exposed to a censorship manipulation.

Thirty-six male and female subjects were selected on the basis of their responses to one item on a multi-item pretest attitude questionnaire filled out by one hundred and five students during regularly scheduled Psychology classes. Eighteen students who had indicated moderate disagreement (i.e., 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7 on a 0 to 20 scale) and eighteen who had indicated moderate agreement (13, 14, 15, 16, or 17) in response to the statement "Police should never be allowed on college campuses" were contacted by phone and asked to participate in a study on the recall of verbal material. They were promised $1.50 for participation and were told that the experimental session would last less than 30 minutes.

Each subject reported individually to an office in the psychology department and was greeted by the experimenter. Within the Agree and Disagree groups subjects were randomly assigned to the No Censor, Censor Own Position, or Censor Other Position conditions. In the experimental session, subjects assigned to the No Censor condition were simply asked to indicate their attitude regarding the "police on campus" issue and how strongly they held that position. The remaining subjects were informed that the experimenter had intended for them to listen to and take a recall test on a tape-recorded

speech advocating that "Police should be allowed on college campuses whenever necessary" or that "Police should never be allowed on college campuses." The experimenter then pointed out that she was not going to be able to play the tape, however, because she had just received a note from the college dean which forbade her to play it to undergraduates. At this point she reiterated the position advocated on the tape and asked the subject if he would mind filling out a brief attitude questionnaire since they would not be able to go on with the experiment.

A pre- to post-test change score was computed for each subject. For these change scores, movement toward the end of the scale that the subject had initially endorsed was arbitrarily defined as positive. A 2 x 3 analysis of variance on these change scores revealed a significant main effect for experimental condition ($F=6.47$, $df=2/30$, $p < .05$) but no interaction of initial position with experimental condition and no main effect for initial position. Hence, the design could be collapsed across the initial Agree-Disagree variable and the mean change scores are presented in Table 1.

A one-way analysis of variance on the data of Table 1 revealed a significant overall treatment effect ($F=6.69$, $df=2/33$, $p < .01$). Further, the mean change in the Censor Own Position condition was significantly different from and opposite in direction to the mean change in the Censor Other condition ($F=13.4$, $df=1/33$, $p < .001$). The comparisons of the Censor Own vs. No Censor and Censor Other vs. No Censor were each of borderline significance ($F=3.43$, $df=1/30$, $p < .08$; $F=3.20$, $df=1/30$, $p < .10$; respectively).

The results appear to offer support for the hypothesis. Subjects who were told they were not going to be allowed to hear a speech that they already agreed with became even more favorably disposed to the position ad-

vocated in the speech. Subjects who were told they were not going to be allowed to hear a speech they initially disagreed with changed their attitude in the direction of greater agreement with the speech.

Recently the question of censorship has arisen with respect to obscene and pornographic materials. There is some evidence about the effects of exposure to pornograph (e.g., Athanasiou & Shaver, 1970; Davis & Braucht, 1970) but little attention has been given to what happens when an individual is aware that he is being prevented from seeing or hearing "tabooed" material. This paper suggests that censorship itself may have attitude change effects.

References

Athanasiou, R., and Shaver, P. Correlates of response to pornography, Proceedings of the 78th Annual APA Convention, 1970, 5, 349-350.

Brehm, J. W. A theory of psychological reactance, New York: Academic Press, 1966.

Davis, K. E., and Braucht, G. N. Exposure to pornography, character, and sexual deviance: A retrospective survey. Presented at American Psychological Association Convention, September, 1970.

Weaver, W., Jr. Nixon repudiates obscenity report as morally void, The New York Times, October 25, 1970, 120, Pp. 1 and 71.

Table 1

Mean Attitude Change

Censor Other Position	No Censor	Censor Own Position
-2.00	-0.17	+1.75

Note: A positive score indicates movement toward the end of the scale initially endorsed. n = 12 in each condition.